

VZCZCXRO3619
PP RUEHCHI RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHBK #0269/01 0330424
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 020424Z FEB 10
FM AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9783
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 7970
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 0384
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 5922
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 6167
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 2311
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 0294
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CJCS WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000269

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/01/2020

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [SMIG](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: CHINA,S SUSTAINED, SUCCESSFUL EFFORTS TO COURT
SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THAILAND - PERSPECTIVES AND IMPLICATIONS

REF: A. BANGKOK 186

[1](#)B. 09 BANGKOK 2851

Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason 1.4 (b, d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Thai contacts from government to academia see a decade-long Chinese romance of Southeast Asia, both through ASEAN and bilaterally, to have been successful in increasing Chinese influence during a period in which many believe that U.S. influence and prestige in the region has waned. The Chinese effort in Thailand in particular is multifaceted and deeply rooted, from diplomatic to economic, military to cultural. Chinese high-level visits to Thailand and reciprocal Thai visits to China by Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers, Defense Ministers, and top-ranking military brass continued at a rapid pace in 2009, leading to a slew of new agreements. Thais compliment the Obama administration's efforts in 2009 to re-engage diplomatically in Southeast Asia. However, even government officials and academics sympathetic to the U.S. see the dynamic of China rising and the U.S. receding likely to continue, unless the U.S. takes more vigorous action to follow-up with sustained efforts to engage on issues that matter to the Thai and the region, not just what is perceived as the U.S.' own agenda. This cable is one in a series examining aspects of the China-Thai relationship; septels will examine Thai-Sino economic relations and cultural ties/exchanges.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: Thailand has never seen international relations as a zero-sum game and has traditionally sought good relations with all sides; the uptick in Chinese influence and activity does not automatically mean a corresponding decline in U.S. influence. The upcoming trip of Thai Army Commander GEN Anupong to the U.S. on a counterpart visit February 7-13 is a good start for the bilateral relationship in 2010. Equally important in building on the promise of 2009 will be inviting PM Abhisit to Washington, putting substance into the promise of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), and launching the next session of the Strategic Dialogue as agreed by the Secretary and Thai FM Kasit last April. End Summary and Comment.

CHINA RISING, U.S. FADING?

[1](#)3. (C) Indications that the U.S.'s historically close relationship with Thailand and the region is being challenged by the rise of China have become increasingly evident in

recent years in a variety of arenas, not just economically but diplomatically, culturally, politically, and even in some security areas. A U.S.-educated Thai Army Colonel at the National Defense College shocked a group of U.S. one-star officers visiting as part of the CAPSTONE program in the fall of 2008 by stating bluntly: "The Thai perceive regional power dynamics as follows: China is rising; the U.S. is distracted/declining; and Thailand will adjust its policies accordingly." In mid-December 2009, the MFA held an in-house seminar that covered the future of China and the U.S. in Asia and reached similar conclusions, two participants told us later that day. Apart from a general consensus that China was reassuming the more prominent role in Asia it had enjoyed for millennia prior to the 19th century, there was much concern expressed about the future of the U.S. in Southeast Asia.

¶4. (C) Participants in the December MFA seminar cited several factors behind their doubts about the U.S. staying power in the region, according to participating Thai MFA officials. They believed the damage from economic problems in the U.S. over the past few years would severely limit the ability of the U.S. to influence global economic affairs and to dedicate the budget necessary to maintain its military advantage in the region. Other attendees reportedly suggested that a fascination in Washington with Indonesia and Vietnam would likely lead to continued decreased interest/involvement in Thailand bilaterally. Finally, several participants suggested that recent trips by President Obama and Secretary Clinton to China had demonstrated a much more conciliatory U.S. stance towards China; they interpreted

BANGKOK 00000269 002 OF 004

this development as a sign that the balance of power between the U.S. and China had shifted in favor of China, rather than the possibility that the U.S. stance reflected the Administration's more cooperative approach to managing the complex relationship with China.

CHINA'S DIPLOMATIC INROADS TO ASEAN...

¶5. (SBU) One avenue the PRC has used to court Southeast Asia is through sustained, friendly diplomatic engagement over the past decade. China's diplomatic romance of ASEAN started a decade ago, Thammasat International Relations Professor Praphat Thepchatri stated at a January 14 seminar titled "The Obama Administration's Policy Towards Southeast Asia, One Year On." (Note: despite not being on the seminar agenda, China's role in Southeast Asia was as much under discussion by participants as the U.S. role. End note). Suspending its confrontational focus on South China Sea territorial disputes, Beijing changed its approach and was the first big outside power to sign the Southeast Asia Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN. It then pursued a clear, patient, well-planned strategy of engagement in the region through repeated reciprocal visits at all levels.

¶6. (SBU) Praphat and fellow seminar speaker Dr. Wiwat, a Cornell and Harvard-educated mainstay of U.S.-Thai exchanges for decades, contrasted the Chinese charm offensive to what they termed the "lost" years of the Bush administration, during which time they claimed the U.S. had lost significant prestige and moral standing as a world leader in the eyes of ASEAN governments and citizens. Praphat complimented the U.S. diplomatic strategy in 2009, including the US-ASEAN Leaders' Meeting in Singapore, the U.S. signing of the TAC, the launch of the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), and the U.S.-announced intention to send an Ambassador to ASEAN in Jakarta.

¶7. (SBU) The Chinese, however, did not stand still in 2009, Praphat noted. During the 12th ASEAN-China Summit in October, China made further inroads by establishing the \$10 billion China-ASEAN Fund on Investment Cooperation and a \$15 billion Commercial Credit to support infrastructure

development in ASEAN member states, including the construction of roads and railways, for "connectivity" between ASEAN and China. Modest U.S. initiatives lacked such similar signature projects, he said.

...AND BILATERALLY

18. (SBU) The fast pace of high-level Chinese bilateral visits to Thailand continued in 2009. Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao visited Thailand twice, to attend ASEAN 3 meetings in April and October. Defense Minister Liang Guanglie visited in December to enhance Thai-Sino military cooperation, pushing (successfully) for new military exercises. PM Abhisit went to Beijing in June 2009 with the goal of boosting bilateral trade relations and luring Chinese tourists back to Thailand after the 2008 unrest/airport closure. FM Kasit visited China three times in 2009. The Chinese embassy told us recently that there are so many visits to Thailand, involving not only central government officials but provincial trade delegations, that they do not assign control officers for anyone lower than a Vice-Minister.

19. (C) During Abhisit's June visit, Thailand and China signed eighteen agreements covering Thai exports of rubber, fruit, rice, jewelry, and other goods worth an estimated total value of \$1.05 billion - an example of the Chinese paying attention to the Thai top priorities (in this case: exports and trade ties), even as China itself benefits from the China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (see septel for more on Sino-Thai economic relations). Abhisit characterized the trip a success that would lead to stronger trade and investment cooperation between the two countries (Note: In contrast, we have not been able to respond positively to Abhisit's repeatedly expressed desire, since he took office in December 2008, to visit Washington to promote Thai-U.S.

BANGKOK 00000269 003 OF 004

relations. End Note).

10. (C) We have also noticed an ever increasing quality to the Chinese diplomatic presence in Thailand. Many Chinese diplomats are fully fluent in Thai, led by the Chinese Ambassador, who has spent 17 years of his career posted here and routinely makes local TV appearances. Those that do not have previous Thai experience, like the DCM, are smart, articulate, and increasingly confident in speaking up at English-language international relations seminars once the preserve of "Western" diplomats.

GREATER CHINESE MILITARY ENGAGEMENT...

11. (C) In recent years the Thai military has increased its engagement with China, in the face of sustained Chinese interest. Thailand and China officially initiated annual defense talks in 2001; they conducted their first joint military exercise in 2005, focusing on humanitarian relief. China has conducted intensive military diplomacy with Thailand via high-level, expenses-paid junkets and educational exchanges for years, currying favor at many levels of the military, starting at the very top. Thai Army Commander General Anupong Paojinda, the most powerful Thai military officer, frequently travels to China. In comments to close aides after one trip in early 2009, Anupong favorably compared the treatment he receives in China to the "big brother" approach of his U.S. counterparts, whom he viewed as at times more interested in pursuing potential concerns over human rights and democracy than in building relationships, one of his aides told us later.

12. (C) In the wake of the 2006 coup, Beijing pressed its advantage while the U.S. suspended \$24 million in various forms of military assistance and restricted high-level engagement. Stating the coup was an internal affair, China quickly provided \$49 million in military aid/credits to

Thailand, increased the number of exchange students at both countries' staff colleges, and successfully pushed Thailand to conduct annual, small-scale Special Forces joint exercises. The two nations signed a Joint Action Plan in May 2007 that solidified their cooperation and opened the door for a further increase in joint military activities.

¶13. (C) During a December 2009 visit of the Chinese Minister of Defense, the two countries agreed to expand bilateral exercises starting in 2010 to include an amphibious landing event, a naval search and rescue, and a humanitarian relief exercise. The maritime exercise will be conducted with the Royal Thai Marine Corps (RTMC) at the platoon/company level and take place over the course of one week later in 2010. While still in the planning stage, it is expected to involve approximately 100 marines from each side, one amphibious ship with approximately 5-10 amphibious assault vehicles and/or landing craft.

...THOUGH THAI CONCERNS DO EXIST

¶14. (C) Not all Thai leaders are on board with the expansion of military ties, however. The Royal Thai Marine Corps and the MFA have resisted the rapid expansion of exercises with the Chinese, with the MFA strongly recommending that exercises with China focus on humanitarian or disaster relief to avoid causing alarm with the U.S. That said, Foreign Minister Kasit advised EAP DAS Marciel in early November 2009 that Thailand could not continue to say no to China's requests for more military engagement, and that the U.S. military needed to re-engage more seriously, and to respond "at least symbolically" to Thai requests for Excess Defense Articles (ref B).

¶15. (C) Dr. Chulacheeb Chinwanno, Vice Rector for International Affairs at Thammasat University and a specialist on both the U.S. and China, told us in December that he doubted that Thailand would adopt Chinese military techniques in the next few years because the Thai military still prefers training and education in the U.S. He also

BANGKOK 00000269 004 OF 004

noted that the Thai military has been reluctant to make new large-scale weapons purchases from China because of concerns dating back to the 1980s, when much of the military equipment purchased from the Chinese was found to be of poor quality and was ultimately reserved for training or left to rust in warehouses.

¶16. (C) Moreover, China's sale of conventional weapons to Thailand's neighbors has the potential to create tension in the relationship, MFA Department of East Asian Affairs Officer Surat Suwannikkha told us in December. Surat said that then MFA Permanent Secretary Virasak Futrakul had "sternly" raised this issue with the Chinese and underscored the security risks that such weapons sales pose for Thailand. (Note: Surat would not specify the neighboring country, but Virasak had long focused on the Thai-Cambodian border skirmishes. Vice Foreign Minister Panich raised concerns about the China-Burma relationship with PM A/S Shapiro in mid-January; RTARF J3 LTG Suraphan told A/S Shapiro that the two regional militaries deemed a residual conventional threat to Thailand by Thai military were Cambodia and Burma. See ref A. End Note).

CHINA COURTS THE ROYAL FAMILY

¶17. (C) As part of the Thai-specific charm offensive, the Chinese have courted members of the Royal Family by supporting lavish VIP trips to China. We have heard that Beijing mounted a serious effort in 2007-8 to get King Bhumibol, who has not traveled abroad since a 1995 trip to Laos, to visit China before the King's health took a serious downturn. Princess Sirindhorn, the second most

beloved Thai royal, has made a reported twenty-eight trips to China since 1981 - including three in 2009 - in an effort to foster closer social and educational ties between the two nations. A Chinese domestic web-based popularity contest celebrating the 60th anniversary of the PRC in 2009 picked Sirindhorn as the second most important of "China's top ten international friends."

¶18. (C) The MFA's Surat stressed that the work Princess Sirindhorn had undertaken to enhance Thai-China bilateral relations is more than symbolic. Princess Sirindhorn worked with the Chinese to establish the Princess Sirindhorn Institute, which focuses on joint research in biotechnology, alternative energy, and alternative Chinese medicine and hosts both Thai and Chinese students. Princess Sirindhorn, a fluent Mandarin speaker, also encourages Thai students to study in China and to learn Chinese. The Chinese have also built a special residential compound outside Beijing for Sirindhorn. Those close to Sirindhorn have suggested to us that she is likely to leave Thailand and take up permanent residence in China after the eventual death of King Bhumibol, so as to leave the Thai stage to her brother Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn.

¶19. (C) Princess Chulabhorn also travels frequently to China, making three trips in 2009 for mostly cultural purposes. FM Kasit's third trip to Beijing in 2009 was to attend Chulabhorn's December musical performances, in which she played the zither, a Chinese instrument. Much of the attraction to China for the Princesses, as well as many other Thai, is cultural in nature; Chualbhorn and Sirinhorn are also honorary cultural ambassadors to China. (Septel will examine Sino-Thai cultural ties and exchanges in greater detail).
JOHN